



RIPEC

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Honorable Marvin L. Abney
Chairperson, House Committee on Finance
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02903

March 23, 2021

RE: H. 5193 – Relating to Education – Establishment of Charter Schools

Dear Chairperson Abney,

On behalf of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC), I would like to convey our opposition to *H. 5193 – An Act Relating to Education – Establishment of Charter Schools*. This legislation would disallow the creation of new charter schools, or expansion of existing charter schools, for the next three school years (2021/2022 – 2023/2024). The legislation also would prohibit the state from appropriating funding for new charters, or expanded charters, that were not approved before July 1, 2020 for the next three fiscal years (2021-2024). With this funding prohibition, this bill would apply retroactively—effectively nullifying the preliminary approval by the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education of three new charters, and expansion of three existing charters, which would collectively add over 5,000 new charter school seats by 2034.

Action by the legislature to reverse the preliminary approval granted by the Council after informed consideration is not in the best interest of students, their families, their communities, or the state at large. Preliminary approval was granted after a deliberate process. Charters are required by statute and Council regulations to submit detailed applications that include evidence of community need and support. Community members had the ability to make themselves heard through a 60-day public comment period and public hearings. Prior to granting preliminary approval, the Council moreover conducted independent local impact analyses, consistent with the statutory requirement to “ensure that the [charter’s] proposal is economically prudent for the city or town and academically prudent for the proposed sending school districts and for all students in the sending districts.”

While the Council considered the merits of the specific charter applications before them, there is evidence that charters on whole are producing better student outcomes than traditional public schools. On the most recent Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS), 42.2 percent of charter school students in grades 3-8 achieved proficiency in English Language Arts

(ELA) and Literature, compared to the statewide average of 38.5 percent. In Mathematics, the difference was significantly greater, with charter school student proficiency exceeding the statewide average by over eight percentage points (38.3 percent vs. 29.8 percent).¹ The superiority in proficiency between charter schools and all Rhode Island students is even more impressive when considering that most charter school students hail from districts with relatively low rates of student proficiency; in FY 2020, nearly four-in-five charter school students resided in Providence, Central Falls, Pawtucket, or Woonsocket—districts that are among the lowest performing in the state.² Admittedly, charter school student proficiency was lower than that of the state average on the most recent SAT. Charter school students on average still posted higher SAT proficiency rates than those students enrolled in public school districts in Providence, Central Falls, Pawtucket, or Woonsocket, however.³

The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) moreover has found that students from struggling districts have greatly improved outcomes at charter schools. Students from Providence comprised 47 percent of all charter school students in FY 2020, and while only 17.2 percent of Providence Public School District (PPSD) students demonstrated proficiency in ELA/Lit on the RICAS, 36.4 percent of Providence students who attended a charter or state school outside the district demonstrated proficiency. A similar differential is apparent on the Mathematics portion of the RICAS; 12.4 percent of PPCSD students demonstrated proficiency, compared to 31.5 percent of Providence students enrolled in a non-PPSD public school. Likewise, Central Falls students, who make up 14 percent of the state's charter school population, demonstrated proficiency at far higher levels when attending public schools outside of the Central Falls School District (12.7 percent vs. 33.4 percent in ELA/Lit, and 8.5 percent vs. 25.3 percent in Mathematics).

Due in large part to positive student outcomes, the demand for a charter school education has far outpaced the number of seats available in recent years. Indeed, RIDE recently found that there were over ten applications for every seat filled and all three of the charters that were granted preliminary approval to expand demonstrated high application to available seat ratios. Achievement First, for example, was only able to accept roughly one in eight applicants in the

¹ The statewide proficiency rate used here is as reported by RIDE. RIPEC calculated the charter proficiency rate as a weighted average, in which the number of students who were tested at each charter school determined the weight of that school's proficiency rate.

² On the ELA/Literature portion of the 2018-19 RICAS, Central Falls, Woonsocket, Providence, and Pawtucket respectively had the first, second, third, and fourth lowest proficiency rates in Rhode Island. On the Mathematics portion, Central Falls, Woonsocket, and Providence respectively had the first, second, and third lowest proficiency rates in the state, but Pawtucket had the sixth lowest rate, outperforming Burrillville and West Warwick. Additionally, Central Falls, Woonsocket, Providence, and Pawtucket had the four lowest proficiency rates in the state on both the ELA and Mathematics portion on the 2018-19 SAT.

³ On the 2018-19 SAT, 37.3 percent of charter school students achieved proficiency in ELA, compared to 50.5 percent of students statewide. Similarly, charter schools had a proficiency rate of 17.9 percent on the Mathematics portion of the SAT, compared to the statewide average of 31.2 percent. Central Falls, Providence, Pawtucket, and Woonsocket had respective proficiency rates of 14.1 percent, 25.5 percent, 27.8 percent, and 33.1 percent on the ELA portion of the SAT. On the Mathematics portion, Central Falls' proficiency rate was 6.1 percent, Pawtucket's rate was 9.4 percent, Woonsocket's rate was 12.5 percent, and Providence's rate was 14.8 percent. On average, charter schools also outperformed East Providence on the Mathematics portion of SAT (proficiency rate of 16.1 percent).

2020-2021 school year. By reversing the expansion of charter seats, the proposed legislation therefore would make it even more difficult for Rhode Island families to pursue the educational experience that they determine best for their children.

Proponents of this legislation are concerned with the potential financial impact to sending districts, but charter schools come at no extra cost to the state since funding follows the child from the sending district—which no longer has the financial obligation to educate the student—to the charter school. While there may be legitimate issues relating to transition costs for the sending district, the newly approved 5,000 charter seats will be added over the next decade, providing ample time for policymakers to address this issue without taking the drastic step of limiting student access.

There is no question that much needs to be done to ensure that every child in Rhode Island has access to a high-quality education. However, the proposed legislation will not serve that goal but, instead, will make it more difficult for students to access a high-quality education. Two years ago, the Assembly passed a package of legislation that aimed to bring significant reform to elementary and secondary education governance, instruction, and accountability across the state. RIPEC stood in support of this important first step then, and today we humbly suggest that the Assembly continue to work towards improving traditional public schools statewide while simultaneously supporting charter schools.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Michael D'Amico". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and a stylized "D'Amico".

President & CEO
Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council

RIPEC is a nonpartisan and nonprofit public policy research organization dedicated to providing objective research and analysis that addresses the critical challenges surrounding public finance and economic opportunity in Rhode Island.